

THE BELLE OF PITTSBURGH

“You don’t have to get all gussied up,” I told her. “He’s a *hospice* rabbi. He’s used to seeing people in their bathrobes.”

“I’m not people,” my mother said, propped up on the hospital bed that just replaced the single bed in her apartment at the retirement place. “And I don’t parade around in a bathrobe when company comes.” Even now, at 95, impossibly frail and tethered to an oxygen tank, Irene looked glamorous in her blue silk nightie with the ivory lace trim.

“He’s not company,” I protested halfheartedly, though, really, there was no point in arguing. My mother, the former belle of Pittsburgh, would die before she let any man see her in bedclothes without her “face” on.

Which is exactly what will happen, but we didn’t know that yet.

Two weeks earlier—before the buildup of fluid in her lungs started squeezing the breath out her—Irene called me on the phone sounding frantic. Hearing the wheezy panic in her voice, I panicked, too. Could this possibly be *it*? I wondered. After years of serial near-death experiences, had my mother—the woman who joked that she was too mean to die—entered her final days, possibly her final hours? Could she be on the brink of disproving her point?

The answer was no. Maybe Irene had been telling the truth when she claimed that she was too mean to die. Maybe like fictional characters bitten by vampires she belonged to the ranks of the Undead. Maybe *she* was a vampire and, as her daughter, I, too, would be granted eternal life.

“Barb, help me, please,” she implored over the phone. “I’m absolutely going out of my mind. You’ve got to tell me, the bronze silk or the leopard chiffon?”

It so happened that the retirement home was holding its annual black-tie ball that night, and Irene was in knots over what to wear. Forget that she was wobbly on her feet, even with the walker. Forget that she had lung cancer. The lady was a coquette—adored by men, envied by women—a flirty knockout with a smart mouth.

“Every night they can’t wait to see what I’m wearing. You wouldn’t believe what some of them show up in,” she’d scoff. “*Gymsuits!*”

I counseled the leopard chiffon.